

## **Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us: A Cooperative Inquiry by Self-Identified Minorities in a Teacher Preparation Program**

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Minority teacher candidates' capacity to connect with diverse students in preK-12 settings is a driving force behind the demographic imperative to diversify the teaching professions (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Banks et

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al., 2005). Teacher candidates of color have great confidence in their abilities to relate to students of color and to serve as role models (Weisman & Hansen, 2008; Williams, Graham, McCary-Henderson, & Floyd, 2009). Similarly, efforts to draw men into the teaching professions have centered on male teachers' potential to be role models to male students (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). The possible connections fostered by a diversified teaching force are offset by the reality of classroom demographics. Teachers of color make up only 16% of the U.S. teaching population, while 44% of students are individuals of color (Noel & Sable, 2009). Male teachers comprise 24% of teachers across grade levels and only 15% at the

elementary level (Coopersmith, 2009). By contrast, student populations are fairly evenly split between male and female (Noel & Sable, 2009).

Recognizing the importance of increasing the number of minorities in teacher education programs and subsequently increasing the number of minority teachers in the field, this article is written by five self-identified minorities in teacher education. We view our experiences through the lens of connecting to others as we explore our decisions to enter teaching, our experiences in a teacher preparation program, and our professional goals. Our aim is to improve the experiences of minority teacher candidates while enrolled in their teacher education program with the hopes that this will facilitate minority teachers' entrance into the teaching professions. To this end, our research questions are: What does it mean to identify as the “other” in a teacher education program? What obstacles have we encountered as a result of being the “other”? How do we, as teacher candidates and a teacher educator, believe our “otherness” will impact our teaching? In what ways do we perceive our “otherness” as a benefit to education programs and education as a whole?

### **Perspectives on Research**

There are distinct benefits to recruiting additional ethnic and gender minorities to the teaching professions. The need for all children to have academic role models who closely reflect student populations has been a key rationale for diversifying the teacher workforce for the past 20 years (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In other words, “Children need role models—they need to see themselves in the faces of their teachers” (Riley, 1998, p. 19). One example of academic role modeling is Klopfenstein's (2005) study that showed a strong positive correlation between the number of Black teachers of advanced mathematics and the number of Black students who enrolled in these classes. In the case of male teacher candidates, an additional reason for the call for role models is the perception of a shrinking number of male role models in children's homes (Gosse, 2011). A final rationale behind the arguments for male teachers and teachers of color as role models includes a belief that the prevalence of White, female teachers has sent a message that school and schooling are feminine and/or White pursuits (Martino, 2008; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Besides serving as role models, minority teachers tend to forge closer connections to students' families and communities, particularly when these teachers share cultural background and experiences with the students they teach (Sleeter & Thao, 2007). This “cultural synchronicity” facilitates teachers linking academic material to students' previous knowledge and experiences (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Additionally, teachers of color seem to hold higher expectations for students of color (Garcia & Guerra, 2004) and to have a strong commitment to social justice (Dilworth & Brown, 2001; Su, 1997). Perhaps as a result, a growing body of literature has argued that students of color may perform better when their teachers are also individuals of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Villegas & Davis, 2008).

For example, Dee (2004) analyzed standardized test results based on students' and teachers' race, finding that students who shared the teacher's race performed better. While there is little evidence that gender impacts student performance (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005), one study found that both male and female students demonstrated greater academic effort when their teacher was male than when their teacher was female (Ouazad & Page, 2010).

Diversifying teacher populations benefits all children. The presence of male teachers promotes gender equity, disrupting the "traditional gender appropriate behavior and roles" that are embedded in schools (Blount, 2000, p. 83; Johnson, 2008). Blount (2000) used the examples of women teaching early grades, offering motherly affection and praise for daily tasks, while men, in administrative roles of authority and as coaches, assume a more fatherly role. Further, the presence of multiple male teachers in a school settings provides "the potential of modeling the multiplicity of manhood" (Davison & Nelson, 2011, p. 91), affirming many forms of masculinity, maleness, or manhood and offsetting traditional gender norms. Increasing the number of men in the teaching professions could also disrupt children's notions that some careers are only viable options for men or for women (Benton, DeCourse, & Vogtle, 1997).

Similarly, a more ethnically and culturally diverse population of teachers sends a message that schools and education belong to everyone.

A diverse teaching force is good for all children and the health of our democracy. The case is made that not only should the authority of knowledge not be seen as the special privilege of Whites, but also that teachers of different races and ethnicities can better prepare children for life in a multicultural society. (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005, p. 136)

Diversifying the teaching force requires developing teacher preparation programs that support diverse teacher candidates. At this point, many teacher preparation programs focus on White, female teacher candidates to the exclusion of men and individuals of color (Morrell, 2010).

The experiences of male candidates and candidates of color upon entry into teacher preparation programs are not well documented (Montecinos, 2004; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). The existing literature paints a picture of teacher candidates who do not see themselves represented in teacher education curricula (Montecinos & Nielson, 2004; Sheets & Chew, 2002). Morrell (2010) suggests, "The majority of American educators are White, middle class, and female. Most textbooks and articles for pre-service teachers assume their readers reflect these characteristics" (p. 1). Male teacher candidates view some teacher preparation curricula as "feminine," particularly assignments that encourage candidates to be artistic and decorative (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). In addition to feeling underrepresented within curriculum, teacher candidates of color feel misrepresented in their classroom interactions with White teacher educators and White peers and are reluctant to talk about issues

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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of race and racism (Gomez, Rodriguez, & Agosto, 2008; Johnston-Parsons, Lee, & Thomas, 2007). Further, previous research has been conducted on minority teacher candidates rather than authored by these candidates themselves, meaning that the experiences of these candidates were filtered through the lenses of researchers (e.g., Gomez, Rodriguez, & Agosto, 2008; Williams, Graham, McCary-Henderson, & Floyd, 2009). Overall, minority teacher candidates feel rather disconnected from teacher education, and the voices of underrepresented teacher candidates are missing from the curricula, the classroom, and the literature.

Our article is a departure from previous literature in that all authors identify as minorities or “other” in a teacher education program, and four of the five authors are teacher candidates. Said (1978) first used the term “other” to describe that which is positioned as inferior and alien in relation to dominant cultures. We take up the term “other” to describe our positions of isolation and alienation within a teacher education program. Reasons for our “otherness” include, but are not limited to: language, cultural background, national origin, levels of education, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, marital status, family structure, learning style/ability, and age.

### **Methodology**

We selected cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996) as a methodology to highlight our (often marginalized) voices and to move from isolation to connection with one another. Cooperative inquiry is characterized by cycles of reflection and action, with each cycle of action including greater openness and awareness of the experiences. Cooperative inquiry fuses the roles of researcher and participant, recognizing all people involved as decision makers and allowing individuals to decide their own level of involvement. We connected with one another as equals within this research.

According to Heron (1996), the first stage of a cooperative inquiry is to set a purpose and a plan for the inquiry based upon an initial group reflection. The initial reflection stage leads to an action stage comprised of initial data collection, data analysis, and revision of the research plan in response to initial data. The third stage involves a continuation of data collection and analysis with “greater openness to experiences” (Heron, 1996, p. 49). The final stage is one of reflection upon data and findings from the previous stages and includes the decision to engage or not engage in an additional cooperative inquiry cycle. Cooperative inquiry provided a framework for our simultaneous reflection upon and participation in a teacher education program as well as a means to connect with one another as scholars and as the “other.”

### **Context**

Our cooperative inquiry took place in a comprehensive state university from Fall 2010 until Spring 2012. There were 7,494 full time undergraduate students at the university when this research began. Of those, 12.5% were Black or African

American; 0.3% were American Indian/Alaskan Native; 2.0% were Asian; 0.1% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 5.6% were Hispanic of any race; 9.7% were of unknown ethnicity; 0.5% were non-resident alien; 2.0% were two or more races; and 69.3% were White. Thirty-eight percent were male and 62% were female. At this time, there were 807 students majoring in elementary or early childhood education. Of these students, 10.8% identified as ethnic/racial minorities (specific ethnicities were unavailable) and 9.4% were male. Elementary and early childhood majors were less diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity than the university as a whole.

### ***Stage One: Participants and Purpose***

The initiating researcher, Laura Bower-Phipps (LBP), issued an invitation in her upper level education courses in Fall 2010 for interested teacher candidates to participate in a research project that would explore experiences in a teacher preparation program. The call for participation was to all who identified as “the other” or a minority because of any reason, including race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, (dis)ability, or any similar reason. At this time, LBP taught three courses with a total of 37 students. Of these, only one student was male and four were individuals of color.

Six students responded to this call, and each attended an initial meeting to determine the purpose of the group. The initial meeting was stage one in the cooperative inquiry cycle. We formulated potential questions for discussion and agreed upon the frequency of meetings and group members’ roles and responsibilities. We decided to meet monthly, addressing one or two discussion questions at each meeting. LBP compiled the discussion questions, formulated a timeline, and sent the information to group members for approval. One student who attended the initial meeting declined from further participation due to other responsibilities. The remaining participants included four female students who identified as the “other” primarily because of their ethnicity, one male student who identified as the “other” because of his gender, and the initiating researcher who identified as the “other” because of her sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup> Appendix A contains our autobiographies, which serve as a much more detailed description of participants. Four of the five students have chosen to be authors on this paper; the fifth is included as “participant one.”

At the subsequent meeting, LBP obtained informed consent from the student members of the group, and we constructed research questions based on our initial meeting: What does it mean to identify as the “other” in a teacher education program? What obstacles have we encountered as a result of being the “other”? How do we, as teacher candidates and a teacher educator, believe our “otherness” will impact our teaching? In what ways do we perceive our “otherness” as a benefit to education programs and education as a whole?

**Stage Two: Data Sources**

From that point forward, all meetings were audio-recorded and followed a consistent format, including data collection through response to one or two discussion questions from the list generated at our first research meeting. See Appendix B for a schedule of discussion questions. LBP sent the schedule of discussion questions to other group members at the beginning of the project, and all group members knew the discussion question before coming to each meeting. We held eight research meetings from September 2010 until May 2012. Each meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes. LBP transcribed each meeting and sent the transcript to group members one week prior to the next meeting. The transcripts from our meetings were our primary data source.

**Stage Three: Data Sources and Data Analysis**

We engaged in stages two and three at each of our monthly meetings. Stage three consisted largely of member-checking transcripts and initial analyses. LBP performed an inductive qualitative analysis following each meeting to determine initial themes, categories, and subcategories (Merriam, 1992). She presented analysis of the cumulative data, in written and verbal format, to all group members for member checking at each meeting. This analysis consisted of themes, categories, and supporting quotes. We clarified, questioned, and commented upon both transcripts and analysis during meetings.

In addition to our discussions, each of us constructed an autobiography, which was edited by other members of the group. Our autobiographies, included in abbreviated form in Appendix A, were our secondary data source. We held three additional meetings during Summer 2011 and Fall 2011 to refine autobiographies through a peer editing process and to co-construct proposals for various research presentations. These meetings were also audio-recorded. We included these actions within Stage Three, because we wrote our autobiographies and proposals with a greater level of awareness, due to our engagement in cooperative inquiry.

**Stage Four: Data Analysis**

Our final stage of cooperative inquiry was a second stage of data analysis in which LBP organized the themes by research question. When themes pertained to two or more research questions, she used categories to refine and reshape the overarching themes. This process, akin to the constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), continually related back both to the research questions and to the data to determine the saliency of the themes. Resulting themes were member-checked with all group members in Spring 2012 at two audio recorded meetings and triangulated with the autobiographies, resulting in five themes: defining otherness, being recognized as the “other,” the value of “others,” challenges of being the other, and professional goals.

## **Findings**

We organized our findings by theme, starting with defining “otherness” and being recognized as “other” to provide context and to respond to our first research question. We continued with the challenges of being the “other” to provide depth and to address our second research question. We ended with the value of the “others” and professional goals to provide vision and to respond to our third and fourth research questions.

### ***Defining “Otherness”***

Throughout our discussions, we developed a list of forms of “otherness.” This list included language, cultural background, national origin, differences from previous generations, level of education, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, marital status, family structure, learning style/ability, age, and experience with abuse. This list demonstrated a disconnected, fractured version of our lived experiences. Our autobiographies, found in Appendix A, contain a more integrated view of our “otherness.” As Maria Cruz (MC) stated during a meeting, “I classify myself as the other for a couple of reasons. My cultural background is different. I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. I speak a different language. I come from a very low socio economic status.” And Cristina Albaladejo (CA), in talking about “otherness” not always being visible, reminded the group, “Being diverse includes much more than the obvious.”

### ***Being Recognized as the “Other”***

In addition to our self-identification as the “other,” we have felt that peers, professors, and classroom teachers labeled us as “other” and positioned us as outsiders.<sup>2</sup> MC explained this from the perspective of a Dominican woman in a teacher preparation program, “People look at you like, ‘Oh, man. This young girl, Spanish girl. What’s she doing here?’” And Thomas Homa (TH) related his experience as a male in the program, “One of the professors was using teacher in the feminine form, ‘her.’ Then she looked at me, and I stood out like a sore thumb.” CA talked about her feelings of “otherness” only after a teacher in the field identified her as Hispanic.

The kids always ask me my last name, and I always say, “Call me Ms. A,” because they can’t say my last name. On the last day I told them, my name is Ms. Albaladejo. And the teacher said, “Are you Hispanic? I wish you would have told me that a long time ago. I would have put some use to you.” And I laughed, “What do you mean some use?” And she said, “Well, I have some parents you could have helped me with.” But the way she said it, I thought, “Wait a minute, I’m not sweeping anything around here! I’m not weeding!”

As evident from CA’s experience, some of us were not readily recognized as the “other,” despite our self-identification. We were forced to decide between passing as a member of the dominant culture or making our identity known. LBP



### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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described her response when a colleague assumed she was married to a man, “I thought, I could let this go. But then when she asks about my husband, it becomes more and more awkward. I shouldn’t have to feel like [being gay] is something I shouldn’t share.”

There were times that we were recognized as different without feeling that we were negatively positioned as outsiders. CA explained experiencing this in LBP’s class.

It’s because of that [being different] I really appreciated when you asked us in class, “What do you want me to know about you?” I wrote down, “It takes me a little longer to comprehend things. I’m a visual learner.” I’ve never had a teacher who has done that. If every professor did listen to that and actually taught with that in mind, I think it would make a big difference.

In contrast, MC talked about professors not recognizing students’ differences, “With the professors, I don’t think they get it. I love school, but I have to go home and cook and clean and take care of my kids. It’s different for me.” Arlette Mello Johnson (AMJ) echoed this frustration.

It’s hard when you’re a full time student and have a full time job and a house and a husband who needs a lot of attention. It feels like if you’re not an A student, you’re not good enough. You’re fighting, fighting. And you know you’re not going to win.

CA suggested that professors recognizing the uniqueness of all students would increase learning in teacher preparation programs. “It would be nice if our professors knew our life stories and knew what was going on with our lives. It would probably make it easier and then they’d understand and we’d understand more.”

### ***Challenges of Being the “Other”***

There were challenges of being the “other” that extended beyond issues of being recognized as or not recognized as the “other.” We categorized these challenges as those in teacher preparation courses, challenges in fieldwork, and structural challenges, including language barriers, national laws, and immigration status. While structural challenges greatly impacted our experiences, we described them as “things you cannot control.” Therefore we focused on factors teacher educators have the potential to impact: isolation, low expectations, and lack of background knowledge.

The most common challenge for us was isolation. A Puerto Rican group member, participant one, expressed, “When I look around in the classroom sometimes I just see White American girls going for teaching. It always made me feel a little weird.” And AMJ shared, “We’re being isolated from the majority, from the other group of our peers. There’s a lack of connection there: background, nationality, all of those things.”

Our feelings of isolation impacted our experiences in the program. LBP expressed, “The challenge of being gay as a professor in the classroom is the emotional energy it takes to decide if and when to tell students. I don’t mind people knowing.



I just don't want the big moment of telling them." TH discussed not knowing how to interact with his classmates as the only male in the class. "You're in a group with three [women]. Are they expecting you to take charge? Or if I volunteer to take charge, are they saying, 'Oh, here's the guy just taking over.' You have no idea what you're supposed to do." While we appreciated the opportunity to work in groups because of the potential to connect with classmates, group work also led to further feelings of isolation, as discussed by CA and AMJ.

AMJ: Every time we make groups, I know I don't have lots of friends.

CA: I don't either.

AMJ: I always feel I don't want to be the annoying one, like, "Can I sit with you?" I never know how to ask. I love when you [LBP] do number one, two, three. So I'm number two. Nice! Thank goodness.

CA: As opposed to pick a partner.

AMJ: Because you look forward and back, like, oh, I'm by myself.

A second challenge associated with being the "other" was a lack of background knowledge and experiences. CA talked about her school experiences in comparison to her classmates.

When I talk to other girls from the education program, I learn about their education and ways of growing up. It always made me feel excluded. I didn't get to do a lot of the things they got to do in school. It's good for them, but it always made me feel jealous. And showed me that a lot of urban schools are lacking. While I've always felt like the "other," it felt like a burden when I came to college.

Similarly, group members from other countries experienced the challenge of learning to teach and learning about US school systems simultaneously. MC explained, "I know that for me in my case, I'll have to do a lot of planning and research that somebody else wouldn't have to because of my background. More preparation than others."

A third challenge included low expectations from teachers in the field. AMJ reflected, "Sometimes [cooperating teachers] have lower expectations for us, because we're from a different country." MC faced this during student teaching.

They have these low expectations about you, like you're not good for anything. Last week, a couple of teachers stopped by to say, "You're doing such a great job." I'm just glad they are saying it in front of the cooperating teacher. Because I think she's got a very low thing about me. I just want to show her, and myself, that I can do the work, like her or anybody else.

TH, as a male teacher candidate, also felt that expectations were different for him. "My cooperating teacher said, 'I've never had a male student teacher.' Now I've got to live up to something. I can't fail, because the next one comes in, 'I had one [a male student teacher] before you and he failed!'" Facing different expectations

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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from those set for White, female teacher candidates generated feelings of insecurity. Overall, we faced the challenges of isolation; lack of background knowledge; different, often lower, expectations from cooperating teachers.

#### ***Value of “Others”***

Despite, and in some cases because of, the challenges we faced, we believed that the presence of those who identify as the “other” in teacher preparation programs and in schools benefited students, teacher candidates, and teacher educators. Most importantly, we saw teachers who identified as “other” as role models for students who identified as the “other.” We talked about wanting to serve as examples of individuals who overcame obstacles and barriers to reach our professional goals. In many cases, we ourselves did not have these role models. CA reflected, “I had a lot of White teachers. I wonder if I had more Hispanic teachers how I would have seen things differently. If I had more role models that I could relate to, I wonder if I would feel less like the other.”

We suggested that teachers who were the “other” naturally connected with some students because of background, as stated by AMJ, a Brazilian immigrant.

I think a lot of children can relate to you if they recognize that you are a little different from other teachers, other mentors. And I think they will be more open if they feel confident that you’re a confident teacher and have succeeded.

LBP talked about connecting with students who identified as minorities, “I think me talking about my ‘otherness’ may make students in a class feel more comfortable. Students know that you’ve experienced being the ‘other,’ even if they don’t put it in those words.” We believed that we served as role models, because we showed students who were the “other” that they, too, could overcome barriers and obstacles and succeed in life.

In addition to connecting to students because of a shared feeling of “otherness,” we talked about teachers who identify as “other” as bringing unique perspectives to teaching, as LBP stated, “Because you’re seeing the world in a different way, you can be more flexible and fluid in your thinking.” And AMJ talked about having, “Different memories.” We brought unique background knowledge to the classroom, as explained by MC, “[We have] language and other types of backgrounds we can incorporate. I’m an immigrant, and I was telling [a second grade class] where I came from. I got a map and showed them.”

Sharing our forms of “otherness” was a way to disrupt the narrative of teaching as a White, female endeavor. MC reflected that being a student teacher of color was a way to shift the views of education as belonging solely to Whites.

I think it just kind of gives some sort of equality. I am student teaching right now. And I just feel so weird, because I am the only Spanish, outsider. Everybody else is Caucasian and White, blonde. I feel really uncomfortable. And the kids, some of them are Brazilian. Being the other is kind of bringing the equality into the equation for them.

Our diverse viewpoints and background knowledge also brought diverse perspectives to teacher preparation programs. TH expressed his appreciation for individuals of color in his classes, “The structure I come from, I don’t get to see any other viewpoint. I have friends, and a good majority of them are White.” We believed that our presence in teacher preparation programs benefited our peers and teacher educators in many of the same ways students in the field benefited. Our presence disrupted the narrative of teaching as a White, female endeavor; provided examples of individuals who had overcome obstacles and barriers; and offered diversified experiences and perspectives.

### ***Professional Goals***

Based on our belief that we added value to schools and teacher preparation programs, we had specific professional goals. While the previous theme focused more generally on the value anyone who self-identified as the “other” brought to the field of education, this theme related specifically to our individual goals. We gained strength through overcoming obstacles, and we expected to use this strength to make a difference in our classrooms. MC explained, “I’m trying to do as much as I can to provide other people with the same tools or maybe even better tools to do good in school.”

Our paramount goal was to make a difference in the lives of children, particularly those who self-identified as “other.” We wanted to connect with students, encourage students, and recognize students’ “otherness.” CA stated her professional goals.

I feel that being the “other” impacts my teaching, because it makes me aware and motivated to meet the needs of diverse learners. Having been in the position where I feel different, outcast, or isolated in a sense, it makes me as a teacher want to do more to help those children feel part of something. How I felt when I was isolated and not a part of something is really what motivates me.

More than being a diverse presence in the classroom, we wanted actively to seek the position of role model, to advocate for all who identify as “other,” and to promote all students’ understanding of diversity. MC talked about inspiring students, “I’m going to act like a positive role model. There’s the stereotype that [Spanish-speaking students] drop out of school. So they see that I am breaking that rule and going to school and being somebody in life.” And AMJ discussed her goals of advocating for all children in her classroom, “For the children to see how diverse our world is. And that everybody gets a chance to participate. Everyone has a voice. And I think that’s very important.” And LBP talked about using her role as a professor and her experience as “other” to promote understanding of diversity.

Being the “other” makes me more aware of the “other,” not just the other because of sexual orientation, but other forms of “otherness.” It also impacts the content that I teach. I definitely have an agenda when it comes to wanting teachers to

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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embrace diversity in their classroom and to meet the needs of all of their learners and just to think about their learners’ backgrounds.

Our professional goals also included continuing to reflect and to research in order to achieve our teaching goals. LBP explained, “I want to make sure that I’m doing research that impacts my teaching.” And AMJ discussed the role of research in her teaching, “What we’re doing now is reflecting on our experiences and hopefully how that will help us to be better educators and to continue to reflect.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

The majority of our findings have confirmed previous research on the experiences of minorities in teacher preparation programs, including minority teachers’ interest in serving as role models (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Weisman & Hansen, 2008; Williams, Graham, McCary-Henderson, & Floyd, 2009), their enthusiasm to connect with students of similar backgrounds (Sleeter & Thao, 2007; Villegas & Irvine, 2010), and their overwhelming sense of isolation in a teacher preparation program (Montecinos & Nielson, 2004; Morrell 2010; Sheets & Chew, 2002). Yet our research provided a voice to teacher candidates who identified as “other” in a way that previous research had not. Each of us had a voice in every element of this research, from formulating the research questions to analyzing the data, to writing this manuscript. We chose to reveal the “other” side of us in an attempt to make teacher preparation and K-12 education more responsive to the needs and experiences of all learners. In the process, we learned more about using our experiences to reach our goals of connecting to all learners.

We each came to this inquiry with a specific, rather limited notion of what made us the “other” in our teacher preparation program. For LBP, this involved sexual orientation; for CA, AMJ, MC, and participant one, it was ethnicity; and for TH, it was gender. Our initial, limited approach to “otherness” reflected the broader field of teacher preparation. Historically, conversations about diversity centered on race with the major dichotomy between White and non-White (Dilworth & Brown, 2001). Our understanding of “otherness” grew as our inquiry progressed, and we came to understand that diversity and “otherness” existed in many forms.

While we understood our identities as complex, we experienced peers, professors, and cooperating teachers labeling us as “other.” In general we wanted to be recognized as different and unique without being negatively positioned as “other.” We expressed a desire to be known by our professors. This desire was congruent with Shulman’s (1987) notion of “knowledge of learners and their characteristics” (p. 8) as a requisite form of knowledge for teachers (and teacher educators). In learning more about diverse teacher candidates as individuals, teacher educators were better able to employ “pedagogical learner knowledge” (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992, p. 387), making us feel more connected to classmates, teacher educators, and academic content.

Many forms of “otherness” remain invisible, and we are challenged to listen to the stories of teacher candidates who seem to be in the majority. Similarly, we urge teacher educators to get to know their students and to facilitate students getting to know one another. We suggest that teacher educators adopt practices to make teacher candidates feel connected and identify and eliminate practices that isolate teacher candidates.

Specific practices in our teacher preparation courses had the potential to make us feel like outsiders. A key example was calling attention to one student’s difference, a sure way to isolate that student. We did not want to act as spokespeople for our race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religions, affinity group, etc. We invite teacher educators to initiate private conversations to hear our perspectives rather than engaging in a class discussion that isolates us.

Conversely, other practices helped us better connect with our professors and classmates. One such practice was a simple survey given at the beginning of the semester to allow students to share anything they wish their professors to know. Asking about students’ experiences and expectations sends a message that teacher educators want to build knowledge of their students and provides an alternative to teacher educators making assumptions about students.

Another important practice was teacher educators assigning groups for class activities and projects. We appreciated the opportunity to work with peers and for our voices to be heard, yet we often lacked the skills, language, or number of friends required to select our own partners or groups. Teacher educators assigning groups, intentionally or randomly, eliminated our feelings of isolation. Additionally, teacher educators assigning group roles alleviated TH’s dilemma of how to interact with female group members without completely dominating the conversation or being entirely silent.

The strategy of grouping or pairing diverse students had a positive impact on us, and we imagine it impacted our classmates. These interactions led us to recognize the inferior experiences some of us had in urban schools in comparison to our classmates’ experiences in suburban schools. While this realization was painful, it also fueled our commitment to high quality education for all students. Many teacher candidates from poor, urban schools have not been able to identify causes of educational inequity (Weisman & Hansen, 2010), making these discussions all the more important. Similarly, these realizations may have fostered our classmates’ understanding of the advantages experienced by children from suburban schools.

Providing the opportunities for us to share our experiences through class activities and group work not only made us feel more connected as we interacted with classmates; it also provided us, other teacher candidates, and teacher educators with diverse perspectives. Beyond broadening our peers and professors’ perspectives, we also hoped to broaden the perspectives of our future students. We hoped, in particular, to enhance the educational opportunities of students who also identify as the “other” through serving as role models to these students. These professional

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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aspirations align with rationale for recruiting diverse teacher candidates (Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

We believed that engaging in this cooperative inquiry was a means to achieve some of our professional goals. We hoped to deepen teacher educators’ and perhaps teacher candidates’ understanding of “otherness” through this work. We also saw this work as a means to advocate for diversity within the field of education and as a way to improve our own practice through reflection. Further, our individual feelings of isolation transformed into a sense of connectedness as we reflected upon and shared our experiences with one another throughout this inquiry project.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited to our perspectives as women of color, a lesbian, and a man (among other elements of our identities). While we came to this inquiry as those who identify as “other,” we recognize the importance of learning from those who see themselves as part of the majority. We suggest cooperative inquiry as a meant to facilitate talking across more racial, gender, socio-economic, sexual orientation divides to counteract assumptions of the “us vs. them” nature and to disrupt notions of schooling as a White, female endeavor.

This study provided a snapshot of the experiences of six individuals in a teacher preparation program. The study does not show how we, as the authors and participants within the study, were shaped through our involvement within this cooperative inquiry. We suggest that additional cycles of cooperative inquiry would offer a sense of how our roles in this inquiry have shaped our teaching practices. Similarly, we began this project when we were already involved in a teacher preparation program. We suggest that additional research begin with prospective teacher candidates before they enroll in a teacher preparation program and continue through their graduation from that program. This type of longitudinal research would provide important information about recruitment and retention of men and individuals of color to teacher preparation programs.

### **Conclusion**

Our experiences as the “other” in a teacher preparation program afforded us a unique perspective on diversity. This cooperative inquiry enabled us to reflect upon these perspectives and how they have been shaped. Our inquiry also provided a space for us to create a professional vision for the future. While our cooperative inquiry holds significance for teacher candidates, classroom teachers, and PK-12 students, we focus on our message for teacher educators. We shared our stories with the hope that teacher educators will be changed by these stories.

In particular, we challenge teacher educators to consider how they define diversity. Our exploration of our “otherness” expanded our definitions of diversity to encompass self-identification as outsiders for a variety of reasons, all of which

impact teacher candidates' experiences in their coursework and fieldwork. We implore teacher educators to decrease the isolation we experienced in our courses. Simple actions like assigning groups rather than expecting students to select partners or making time for students to listen to one another's experiences made a tremendous difference to us. We invite teacher educators to recognize the value added by the "other," to understand their own "otherness" and their students' "otherness," and to learn from the "other" side of us.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> We do not suggest that ethnic and gender minorities are the only form of "otherness" in teacher education. At the same time, all of the men and all of the individuals of color who were LBP's students at the time this research began decided to become involved. We assert that this points to the desire of these individuals (and likely additional teacher candidates who identify as "other") for their voices to be heard.

<sup>2</sup> We wish to be clear that the labeling and positioning as outsiders were our perceptions. The perceptions of peers, professors, and classroom teachers are beyond the scope of this study.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Abbreviated Autobiographies**

#### *Thomas D. Homa (TH)*

Growing up as a White male, I never had the sense of "otherness" in my life. I came from the typical "All American" family. This consisted of a mom and dad, a few brothers and a sister, as well as various pets, including a dog. Life was always easy for me because of my gender and race. Even when I made the decision to become an elementary school teacher, no one ever questioned the decision. Actually, everyone had only positive comments to make. The most common of these were, "You will be an excellent teacher," or "This is great; elementary schools need more male teachers." It was because of this that I walked into Southern Connecticut State University with the idea that everything would be great, and I would face no major hardships during my time in school. However, this changed when I walked into my first teacher education class. For the first time in my life, I experienced the sense of "otherness" because of my gender.

The first time I walked into my education class as a junior, I realized that I was the only male in the classroom. At first this seemed like a great concept, being surrounded by females throughout the semester. However, this great concept changed after the class began and the teacher walked into the classroom and she was female too. I realized that as the only male, I really could not connect with the other students in the class. I always felt awkward when everyone would be talking before class, and I had nothing to add to the conversation. It was not because I did not want to talk, but the topics the females were talking about did not interest me. Also, when we would be in groups, I never knew what role I should play. Do the other members want me to be the "Alpha" male? But if I do that, would they think I was being a dominating male that was suppressing their ideas? I always seemed to have conflicting ideas about my role in the classroom throughout the semester.

It was not just the other students, but the professor as well. I cannot express how many times I had to hear, "Hello ladies and gentleman." It sounds funny at first, but it just kept

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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reinforcing the idea that I was the only male in the classroom. Also, there were times when the professor would use the word “she” to explain the role of a teacher and then look at me and say, “Sorry, Tom.” This made me feel as if I did not belong in that particular classroom and that my decision to become an elementary school teacher was wrong.

Despite the message I have received from my professors, I believe that my “otherness” will be beneficial to the students I will eventually teach. Throughout my student teaching, I realized that many students do not have a positive male role model in their lives. When I would walk into the classroom, the boys in the class would gravitate towards me and my teaching. For me, it would be an honor if I could be that role model to at least one student in my class. Also, by being a male elementary school teacher, I would be breaking the stereotype that males cannot be nurturing compared to females. This will allow all of the students to see that a teacher does not have to be a female figure. Also, this will show the students that if a male can do a stereotypical female job, then a female can do a stereotypical male job. With all of this being said, I believe that I can make a difference in the lives of elementary school students and be a successful teacher.

#### *Cristina Albaladejo (CA)*

Growing up, my life at home was pretty normal. I lived with my mother and father who both emigrated from Puerto Rico. My parents worked hard and with little pay to provide us with everything we needed and more. I grew up in an urban city. It’s not the kind of city you would think of when you think of Connecticut, but it was home and I never realized what went on in other communities and schools. And while life at home was great, a part of me always felt like the “other” in school.

In elementary school, I was one of the only Hispanics in the school where the majority of the students were African American. I was in some way the minority of what already were the minorities. In middle school there were more Hispanics than previous, however, many times I was made fun of and rejected by my peers, because even though I was Hispanic, I didn’t look like the “stereotypical Hispanic.” My skin was fair instead of olive; my hair was light brown instead of dark and more straight than curly. In their eyes I looked like a white girl, which was quite rare where I lived.

By the time I reached college, I was unsure what I wanted to major in. I just knew I wanted to live somewhere in the suburbs because at the time I felt like that’s where I belonged. But working in an after school program with children like me made me realize that I wanted to make a difference. My parents encouraged me to go to college and do something that would make me happy. They wanted me to take advantage of the many opportunities they didn’t have so I may have a better life than them.

So I decided to become a teacher, where I figured would be where I can make a difference; but there were many times where I questioned my decision. I felt I didn’t fit in with other students in my education courses because I could not relate to them or their experiences. Many of the girls were White, well educated, and from suburban towns. Many of them also knew each other from high school. I on the other hand, unfortunately did not meet anyone in the program who came from my town. At the beginning of the program, I often sat very quietly in class because everyone seemed to know each other already, which made me feel out of place. Eventually I did talk to other students who were surprised of my ethnicity and where I had come from, which made me feel more out of place. I still remember a time when one of my professors asked us to make a portfolio featuring a section about ourselves and

our hobbies and experiences that made us different from other teacher candidates. Other students included pictures from their travelling around the world experiences, their hobbies like horseback riding, skiing, and teaching in third world countries. I felt stumped on what to include, and the only thing I could think of was my love of reading, which most of the girls already had. It made me realize how privileged they were and instead of sharing with the class, I burrowed into my desk with the hope that I wouldn't be called on.

Once fieldwork courses began, it made me sick to my stomach to hear other prospective teachers commenting on what "type" of students were in the urban schools, the schools I had attended. It seemed to me that many of them couldn't understand the culture and lifestyle that the children carried with them. And while it made me upset to hear this, it also made me realize how beneficial it was to grow up where I did. My experiences with multicultural students gave me what I think are an advantage over some of my fellow classmates. I brought a refreshing point of view and an understanding of various cultures, and most importantly an appreciation for what these students brought into the classroom. I felt that I could be a role model in the classroom who those "type" of students could relate to.

*Arlette Mello Johnson (AMJ)*

I was born on the Christmas Eve of 1983 in the suburbs of São Paulo, Brazil and raised in a typical middle class family. Mom, dad, three kids and two dogs with a very busy schedule, lots of bills to pay, little money left over, and many, many dreams. Education was literally part of our lives, since my mother had her own math school in a section of our home and was a college professor in the evenings. I was probably ten when I started working for my mom and reinforcing classroom rules to children a year younger than me.

When I got my high school diploma, I was not ready for college like my parents expected me to be. I wanted to be independent and explore the world that I knew so well from books and Hollywood movies. The United States always had a very strong influence in the Brazilian culture. Like many others, I loved the language, the music, the movies, the technology, the revolutions, Barbie dolls, and Disney's princesses. With eighteen years of age and my parents' blessings, I moved to America alone to work with children and learn English. I attended a community college and worked as an au pair in Florida for 16 months, before moving to Connecticut to be closer to my sister and friends. I worked every job under the sun in order to make some money to pay for the rent and gas. I became a financially independent woman that was totally immersed and in love with America. I felt like I had a mission to accomplish and I couldn't go back to Brazil, even though I had excellent opportunities back home and my mother asked me every day to return and resume my college education.

Without realistic opportunities to stay in America legally, lamentably I overstayed my status and became an illegal immigrant. My new status tormented my moral values, my beliefs of human rights, the meaning of being an active member of society, as well as my opportunities as a young citizen. I cried many nights dreaming that one day I would have the opportunity to participate in the community as a legal citizen and get a degree in education. I felt like a prisoner in paradise because I knew that I had so much more to offer and learn. In this challenging time of my early adult years, I met my spouse. We felt in love and married six years later on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in Brazil. Starting a new family and with the support of my spouse, more than ever I wanted to go to college to enhance my possibilities as a young professional and participate in our community as an active and educated citizen.

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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Spending time with children and listening to their creative imagination has always been a passion of mine which brings happiness to my heart and is the main reason why I decided to pursue this productive and fulfilling career in elementary education. Being a minority in the program is challenging, since I had to learn the bureaucratic work to get into a university, I did not speak the language as well as my colleagues, I was raised with different cultural expectations, and I also had to work full time in order to pay the bills. But I cannot complain. Being “the other” helped me be a resilient learner who understands and appreciates the meaning of education, diversity, and perseverance. As a future professional in the field of education, I plan to highlight students’ experiences in an integrated way that celebrates diversity and talents. This includes open space to talk about students’ social and emotional needs, and also encourage all learners to excel at their full potential in a cooperative and relevant way. It is not all about the content. It is also about educating students to live their best lives. I came to America very young and with a bag full of dreams and hopes and I have learned we can do and be whatever we want, it just takes time and hard work. Life is a wonderful journey.

#### *Maria Cristina Cruz (MC)*

I was born in Santiago, Dominican Republic. My early years were spent in a small and very poor city. I was the fifth child. I have one sister and four brothers. We were all brought up as good siblings and believed in persistence and the good within ourselves. As a child, I lived happily live with my parents and siblings. I attended Catholic public schools. My parents were always trying to provide me with the means necessary to grow up healthy and happy. My parents were not literate at all, but that did not prevent them from providing each of their children a good education. My mother was a housewife. She always tried to do as much as she could to teach her children the importance of education in life. She said many times “When you want something, you have to work hard for it”. On the other hand, my father was an air force soldier who was extremely underpaid. He did as much as he could to provide for his family, but times were tough.

Schools were a great experience for me back in my country. I grew up surrounded by many friends. It seemed to be that I had a promising future based on my grades and abilities. During my elementary years, my mother passed away against her battle with cancer. It was one of the saddest moments of my whole life. However, my father and siblings took care of me. High school was very quiet for me. When I finished I was ready to start working as a secretary. However my father said I needed to go to college and become somebody.

Before finishing high school my father and I migrated to the United States. I was about nineteen years old. I will never forget my first year in this country. I moved to the Bronx in NYC. I could not speak the language at all. I could not get into school because of my age. In order for me to start college, I had to wait a whole year to build residency. I did not know what to do with myself. The first thing that came to my mind was to get a job at a major fast food restaurant chains. But my father said “NO.” He wanted me to do better things and become a successful professional. I was becoming really frustrated with the simple tasks that I used to do back in my country but that somehow were getting overwhelming in the states. For example, it was aggravating answering the phone, reading the mail, buying groceries at the stores, and taking the train because I could not speak English. I just wanted to go back home with my siblings and my friends. I missed everyone so much.

Finally, I could register for college and take my entrance exam. I was placed in ESL

classes due to my lack of English language proficiency. It was really difficult for me to learn the language because my classmates were Spanish as well, which did not help me at all. At home all I did was speak Spanish to my father too. As an ESL student I felt excluded from every single class. The environment and other factors were leading me to complete isolation. I identified more and more with Spanish groups over other cultural races. The professors' teaching approach was based on their own cultural norms, experiences and traditions, which did not help me due to my background. I even thought some of the teachers identified with a particular group more than others. That created an uncomfortable feeling that affected my student performance.

I tried to come up with additional ways to learn English along with my college classes. I started reading the newspaper every morning, watching the news, listening to English music, etc. It took me three years to finish an associate's degree in education. I learned so much during that time. One of my new passions was the love for reading. This new interest was revolutionary for me. Back home I was not encouraged to read as much as I was in the USA. One of the teachers that helped me develop this skill was the head of the ESL department. He was such a significant person in my education that his name is the only faculty member name I can remember out of six semesters from college.

By considering myself the "other," I have developed new strategies that will impact my teaching in the near future. For example, I have identified and understood my own attitudes towards diversity based on my experiences with people and how I was affected by these interactions. I will definitely make sure I get to know my students without making any assumptions about them. But most of all, I will keep learning and broadening my horizons to provide a safe environment where students will feel included and never alienated due to their "otherness."

*Participant One (Reconstructed from quotes during discussions)*

I am half Puerto Rican and half Portuguese, but I do not look like I am of Spanish descent. I speak some Portuguese and some Spanish. My dad was born in Bayamon, Puerto Rico. And my mom is the first generation to come to America. My parents speak English, but not the best English. I think my mom transitioned much better than my dad. My dad especially has a tough time. The transfer over from Puerto Rico did not help him. He barely reads; he barely writes. It's tough for him, especially when I was younger and when I had issues or any trouble. Even now, I feel like other girls can go to their parents, because their parents can help them with stuff, where I can't go do that. It's tough for my dad. Because he just does not know how to help. When I wanted help, I couldn't get it. At the same time, it makes me feel better to know I've done everything for myself. When my kids grow up, I can tell them my story.

Reading wasn't really taught in my family. No one really read. And when I went to first and second grade, I started having a lot of reading issues. And pretty soon I was behind in reading. My learning disability always made me feel very uncomfortable in the classroom. I had to spend more time with reading, and I had to do remedial reading. I became a 504 student, which meant that I got extra time on tests. And I was always being tested for reading. When we took a test, I would get really bad anxiety. I would always take the test in a separate classroom. The main time that I've ever felt like the other was when it came to test time and I would have to go to a different room to take the test. But other than that, I always felt like I was part of the classroom in elementary school. Having that disability especially

### *Connecting with the “Other” Side of Us*

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made me uncomfortable, when I got into college. I always felt like I was a little below par than everyone else. And I always had to work extra hard to do everything.

When I look around in the classroom in college, I just see white American girls going for teaching. I see a few Hispanics. I just remember my first two classes. There were just white females. There were no males. It always made me feel a little weird. Looking back, all of my teachers were exactly the same. They were all White, came from good families, were blond, skinny, and perfect. And English was their first language. And it's so weird to think back at it. I don't remember any African American teachers. We had two male teachers at my elementary school, but I never took any classes with them, so I never got that experience. I did some fieldwork in a school, and some of the boys were just talking in Spanish. And I responded to them in Spanish and their jaws just dropped. Of all the teachers at that school, I don't think any of them spoke any kind of Spanish. It put us on a whole different level. They came to me more, and I think it made them feel reassured. I was very happy that it gave us a deeper connection.

#### *Laura Bower-Phipps (LBP)*

In many ways, I am in the majority in teacher education. I am a White woman from a middle class background and a traditional family structure. I grew up in a homogenous community consisting primarily of White, Christian families. On the surface, it may seem that my story does not belong with the stories of the teacher candidates. My “otherness” does not walk into a room with me, as it would if I were a gender or ethnic minority. I identify as “other” because of my sexual orientation. I am a married lesbian. My invisible “otherness” has impacted my teaching career from the day I stepped foot in the classroom as a 22 year old high school Spanish teacher, until now as I serve as an assistant professor of elementary education.

The beginning of my teaching career and my semi-public acknowledgement of my sexual orientation coincided. I intentionally targeted diverse schools when I applied for my first teaching job, because I assumed that I would feel more comfortable as one “other” among many forms of “otherness.” Instead, when I told my department chairperson that I was gay, she advised me not to tell the other members of the department. This admonition made me feel that I could not be a good teacher and a lesbian at the same time. It resulted in me carefully editing anything I said to my colleagues. When everyone else talked about their weekends, I was rather reticent, only discussing school related topics.

I was equally reluctant to share anything about my personal life with my students for fear that they would act differently in my class or that they would be uncomfortable. I even enlisted a male friend to be my “date” to school events, hoping that students would mistake him for my boyfriend. It took a great deal of effort to separate my personal life from my teaching, but I did so with the belief that my students' education would suffer if I were to say something along the lines of, “My partner and I travelled to Costa Rica last summer.” I was also keenly aware that my heterosexual colleagues did not hesitate to mention their significant others.

When I left the K-12 classroom to be a full time doctoral student, I came to question my own silence. My critical pedagogy courses helped me to embrace the simultaneity of my personal and professional identities. My colleagues at my current institution have been welcoming in every way I could have hoped. They are supportive of my research with lesbian mothers. And when I told them that I planned to legally marry my partner, they celebrated with me. Despite my colleagues' acceptance, I find myself slow to mention my wife to



my students. In my classes, I triumph social justice and encourage teacher candidates to represent diverse families and diverse individuals in their curricula. My fear is that if these teacher candidates know that I am gay, they will assume that my cries for social justice are self-serving.

I do find myself nonchalantly mentioning “my wife” in conversations with individual students, hoping that the word will spread. So far, information about my sexual orientation seems only to have increased teacher candidates’ respect for me not lessened it. It appears that teacher candidates recognize the courage it takes for a professor with a small town upbringing to talk about her sexual orientation. Teacher candidates who also identify as the “other” understand that I advocate social justice not only because I believe it is right, but also because I am one of them. I am the “other.”

## **Appendix B**

### ***Schedule of Discussion Questions***

October: Why do you classify yourself as “the other”? Why did you choose to participate in this research?

November: At what point(s) were you made to feel like “the other”? What are obstacles “the other” encounters?

December: What does it mean to be “the other”? What do you see as “the norm” in teachers?

January: What challenges have you faced as “the other” in your education program?

February: What level of acceptance have you experienced in your fieldwork?

March: In what ways does being “the other” impact your teaching?

April: What is the benefit of “the other” in education?

May: How has your participation in this project impacted you?